We claim:

1   1.   A method of enhancing voice mail messages by incorporating a selected background

2   sound with a voice mail message for playback to a listener.

1   2.   The method according to Claim 1, wherein the voice mail message comprises a plurality of

2   message segments, and wherein one or more selected background sounds are incorporated, each

3   of which is associated with one or more of the message segments.

1   3.   The method according to Claim 1, wherein a plurality of background sounds are selected

2   to be incorporated with the voice mail message.

1   4.   The method according to Claim 2 or Claim 3, wherein at least one of the background

2   sounds provides emotional cues for the voice mail message.

1   5.   The method according to Claim 2, wherein at least one of the background sounds is a

2   theme song associated with a speaker who leaves the voice mail message.

1   6.   The method according to Claim 1, further comprising the step of inserting a selected audio

2   file into the voice mail message for the playback to the listener.

1   7.   The method according to Claim 2, further comprising the step of

2   inserting one or more selected audio files into the voice mail message for the playback to

3   the listener.

1   8.   The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected background sound is selected by a

2   speaker of the voice mail message.

1   9.   The method according to Claim 2, wherein the one or more selected background sounds

2   are selected programmatically.

1   10.   The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected background sound is a default

2   background sound for a speaker of the voice mail message.

1   11.   The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected background sound is a

2   dynamically-selected choice selected from among a plurality of background sounds.

1   12.   The method according to Claim 2, wherein the one or more selected background sounds

2   are dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available on a

3   telephone or telephone system from which the voice mail message originates.

1   13.   The method according to Claim 2, wherein the one or more selected background sounds

2   are dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available from a

3   subscription service.

1   14.   The method according to Claim 12 or Claim 13, wherein the dynamic selection is

2   performed randomly.

1   15.   The method according to Claim 12 or Claim 13, wherein the dynamic selection is

2   performed using a profile associated with a speaker of the voice mail message.

1   16.   The method according to Claim 12 or Claim 13, wherein the dynamic selection is

2   performed based upon an identification of an intended recipient of the voice mail message.

1   17.   The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected background sound is a single

2   selection that is available on a telephone or telephone system from which the voice mail message

3   originates.

1   18.   The method according to Claim 2, wherein the one or more selected background sounds

2   are dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available to an

3   apparatus on which the voice mail message is recorded.

1   19.   The method according to Claim 2, wherein the one or more selected background sounds

2   are dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available from a

3   telephone company system through which the voice mail message passes as the voice mail

4   message is being left for the listener.

1   20.   The method according to Claim 1, further comprising the step of transmitting the selected

2   background sound from a telephone or telephone system used by a speaker of the voice mail

3   message.

1   21.   The method according to Claim 20, wherein the selected background sound has been

2   compressed prior to the transmitting.

1   22.   The method according to Claim 2, further comprising the step of transmitting identifiers of

2   each of the selected background sounds from a telephone or telephone system used by a speaker

3   of the voice mail message.

1   23.   The method according to Claim 2, further comprising the step of transmitting an address

2   of each of the selected background sounds from a telephone or telephone system used by a

3   speaker of the voice mail message, wherein each address may be used to locate a file containing a

4   respective one of the selected background sounds.

1   24.   The method according to Claim 23, wherein the address is a Uniform Resource Locator.

1   25.   The method according to Claim 12, further comprising the step of loading one or more

2   new background sounds onto the telephone or telephone system, thereby revising the plurality of

3   background sounds that are available.

1   26.   The method according to Claim 18, further comprising the step of loading one or more

2   new background sounds onto the apparatus, thereby revising the plurality of background sounds

3   that are available.

1   27.   The method according to Claim 19, further comprising the step of loading one or more

2   new background sounds onto the telephone company system, thereby revising the plurality of

3   background sounds that are available.

1   28.   The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected background sound may be

2   selected using one or more of: a dual-tone multi-frequency (DTMF) capability of a telephone

3   used by a speaker of the voice mail message; a touch-sensitive display screen of the telephone;

4   automated instructions stored on or executed by the telephone or a telephone system of the

5   speaker; a key sequence operated using keys of the telephone; or a voice recognition capability,

6   which may be provided by a voice messaging system which records the voice mail message.

1   29.   The method according to Claim 7, wherein the selected audio files may be selected using

2   one or more of: a dual-tone multi-frequency (DTMF) capability of a telephone used by a speaker

3   of the voice mail message; a touch-sensitive display screen of the telephone; automated

4   instructions stored on or executed by the telephone or a telephone system of the speaker; a key

5   sequence operated using keys of the telephone; or a voice recognition capability, which may be

6   provided by a voice messaging system which records the voice mail message.

1   30.   The method according to Claim 1, wherein the incorporating is performed by

2   conferencing the selected background sound into a 3-way call between a speaker of the voice mail

3   message and a receiver thereof.

1   31.   The method according to Claim 1, wherein the incorporating is performed during the

2   playback to the listener.

1   32.   The method according to Claim 3, wherein the incorporating is performed prior to the

2   playback to the listener.

1   33.   The method according to Claim 3, further comprising the steps of:

2   transmitting identifiers of each of the selected background sounds from a telephone or

3   telephone system used by a speaker of the voice mail message; and

4   using each of the transmitted identifiers to access a stored copy of the respective selected

5   background sound;

6   and wherein the incorporating step incorporates the accessed copies.

1   34.   A method of enhancing voice mail messages by inserting a selected audio file into a voice

2   mail message for playback to a listener.

1   35.   The method according to Claim 34, wherein the voice mail message comprises a plurality

2   of message segments, and wherein more than one audio file is inserted into the voice mail

3   message, or the selected audio file is inserted multiple times into the voice mail message.

1   36.   The method according to Claim 34, wherein the inserted audio file provides additional

2   context for the voice mail message.

1   37.   The method according to Claim 35, wherein at least one of the audio files is an audio

2   signature associated with a speaker who records the voice mail message.

1   38.   The method according to Claim 37, further comprising the step of playing the audio

2   signature rather than the voice mail message to the listener.

1   39.   The method according to Claim 37, further comprising the step of using the audio

2   signature to deduce information about the voice mail message.

1   40.   The method according to Claim 34, wherein the voice mail message comprises the

2   selected audio file.

1   41.   The method according to Claim 34, wherein the selected audio file is a theme song of a

2   speaker of the voice mail message.

1   42.   An apparatus for improving voice mail messaging, comprising:

2   means for transmitting a voice message from a user of the apparatus to a separately-

3 located recording means;

4   means for storing one or more pre-recorded sound files on the apparatus;

5   selection means for selecting, from the pre-recorded sound files, one or more of: (1) a

6 background sound and (2) an audio file to be transmitted; and

7   transmission means for transmitting the selection to the recording means for use with the

8 transmitted voice message.

1   43.   A method of merchandising pre-recorded sound files, further comprising steps of:

2   receiving requests for selected ones of the pre-recorded sound files for use as background

3 files to be incorporated with voice mail messages and/or for use as audio files to be inserted into

4 voice mail messages; and

5   providing the selected ones, in response to the step of receiving requests.

1   44.   The method according to Claim 43, wherein the receiving and providing steps are

2 implemented by a for-fee service provider.

1   45.   The method according to Claim 43, wherein the receiving and providing steps are

2 implemented by marketing a telephone for use in improving distance communications.

1 46. A method of improving telephone conversations, comprising incorporating a selected

2 background sound into a telephone conversation between a caller and a called party.

1 47. The method according to Claim 46, wherein the selected background sound is a theme

2 song of the caller.

1 48. The method according to Claim 46, wherein the incorporating is performed by

2 conferencing the selected background sound into a 3-way call between the caller and the called

3 party.

1 49. The method according to Claim 46, wherein the selected background sound is a default

2 background sound for the caller.

1 50. The method according to Claim 46, wherein the selected background sound is selected

2 programmatically.

1 51. The method according to Claim 46, wherein the selected background sound is selected by

2 the caller.

1 52. A system for enhancing voice mail messages, comprising:

2   a voice mail message comprising one or more message segments;

3   one or more background sounds;

4   means for incorporating one or more of the background sounds with one or more of the

5   message segments; and

6   means for playing the voice mail message to a listener with the incorporated background

7   sounds.

1   53.   The system according to Claim 52, wherein at least one of the background sounds

2   provides emotional cues for the voice mail message.

1   54.   The system according to Claim 52, further comprising means for inserting a selected audio

2   file into the voice mail message for the playback to the listener.

1   55.   The system according to Claim 52, wherein at least one of the selected background sounds

2   is selected by a speaker of the voice mail message.

1   56.   The system according to Claim 52, wherein at least one of the background sounds is a

2   default background sound for a speaker of the voice mail message.

1   57.   The system according to Claim 52, wherein the one or more background sounds are

2   dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available on a

3   telephone or telephone system from which the voice mail message originates.

1   58.   The system according to Claim 57, wherein the dynamic selection is performed randomly.

1 59. The system according to Claim 57, wherein the dynamic selection is performed based

2 upon an identification of an intended recipient of the voice mail message.

1 60. The system according to Claim 52, wherein the one or more background sounds are

2 dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available to an

3 apparatus on which the voice mail message is recorded.

1 61. The system according to Claim 52, further comprising means for transmitting the selected

2 background sounds from a telephone or telephone system used by a speaker of the voice mail

3 message.

1 62. The system according to Claim 52, further comprising means for transmitting an address

2 of each of the selected background sounds from a telephone or telephone system used by a

3 speaker of the voice mail message, wherein each address may be used to locate a file containing a

4 respective one of the selected background sounds.

1 63. The system according to Claim 62, wherein the address is a Uniform Resource Locator.

1 64. The system according to Claim 52, further comprising means for loading one or more new

2 background sounds onto the apparatus, thereby revising the plurality of background sounds that

3 are available.

1   65.   The system according to Claim 52, wherein the background sounds may be selected using

2   one or more of: a dual-tone multi-frequency (DTMF) capability of a telephone used by a speaker

3   of the voice mail message; a touch-sensitive display screen of the telephone; automated

4   instructions stored on or executed by the telephone or a telephone system of the speaker; a key

5   sequence operated using keys of the telephone; or a voice recognition capability, which may be

6   provided by a voice messaging system which records the voice mail message.

1   66.   The system according to Claim 52, wherein the incorporating is performed by

2   conferencing the selected background sounds into a 3-way call between a speaker of the voice

3   mail message and a receiver thereof.

1   67.   A system of enhancing voice mail messages, comprising:

2   one or more audio files;

3   a voice mail message comprising one or more message segments;

4   means for selecting at least one of the audio files; and

5   means for inserting the selected at least one audio file into the voice mail message for

6   playback to a listener.

1   68.   The system according to Claim 67, wherein at least one of the audio files is an audio

2   signature associated with a speaker who records the voice mail message.

1 69.   A system for improving telephone conversations, comprising:

2   means for establishing a telephone conversation between a caller and a called party; and

3   means for incorporating one or more background sounds into the telephone conversation.

1 70.   The system according to Claim 69, wherein the means for incorporating further comprises

2 means for conferencing the one or more background sounds into a 3-way call between the caller

3 and the called party.

1 71.   The system according to Claim 69, wherein the one or more background sounds are

2 selected by the caller.

1 72.   A computer program product for enhancing voice mail messages, the computer program

2 product embodied on one or more computer-readable media and comprising:

3   computer-readable program code means for selecting one or more background sounds;

4 and

5   computer-readable program code means for incorporating the selected background

6 sounds with a voice mail message for playback to a listener.

1 73.   The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein at least one of the

2 background sounds is a theme song associated with a speaker who leaves the voice mail message.

1 74. The computer program product according to Claim 72, further comprising means for

2 inserting one or more selected audio files into the voice mail message for the playback to the

3 listener.

1 75. The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein the selected background

2 sounds are selected programmatically.

1 76. The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein the selected background

2 sound are dynamically-selected choices selected from among a plurality of background sounds.

1 77. The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein the selected background

2 sounds are dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available

3 from a subscription service.

1 78. The computer program product according to Claim 77, wherein the dynamic selection is

2 performed using a profile associated with a speaker of the voice mail message.

1 79. The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein a particular one of the

2 selected background sounds is a selection that is available on a telephone or telephone system

3 from which the voice mail message originates.

1　　80.　　The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein the selected background

2　　sounds are dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available

3　　from a telephone company system through which the voice mail message passes as the voice mail

4　　message is being left for the listener. ·

1　　81.　　The computer program product according to Claim 72, further comprising means for

2　　transmitting identifiers of each of the selected background sounds from a telephone or telephone

3　　system used by a speaker of the voice mail message.

1　　82.　　The computer program product according to Claim 74, wherein the selected audio files

2　　may be selected using one or more of: a dual-tone multi-frequency (DTMF) capability of a

3　　telephone used by a speaker of the voice mail message; a touch-sensitive display screen of the

4　　telephone; automated instructions stored on or executed by the telephone or a telephone system

5　　of the speaker; a key sequence operated using keys of the telephone; or a voice recognition

6　　capability, which may be provided by a voice messaging system which records the voice mail

7　　message.

1　　83.　　The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein the computer-readable

2　　program code means for incorporating further comprises computer-readable program code means

3　　for conferencing the selected background sounds into a 3-way call between a speaker of the voice

4　　mail message and a receiver thereof.

1   84.   A computer program product for enhancing voice mail messages, the computer program

2   product embodied on one or more computer-readable media and comprising:

3   computer-readable program code means for selecting one or more audio files; and

4   computer-readable program code means for inserting the selected audio files into a voice

5   mail message for playback to a listener.

1   85.   The computer program product according to Claim 84, wherein at least one of the audio

2   files is an audio signature associated with a speaker who records the voice mail message.

1   86.   A computer program product for improving telephone conversations, the computer

2   program product embodied on one or more computer-readable media and comprising:

3   computer-readable program code means for selecting one or more background sounds;

4   and

5   computer-readable program code means for incorporating the selected background sounds

6   into a telephone conversation between a caller and a called party.

1   87.   The computer program product according to Claim 86, wherein at least one of the

2   selected background sounds is a theme song of the caller.

1   88.   The computer program product according to Claim 86, wherein the computer-readable

2   program code means for incorporating further comprises computer-readable program code means

3   for conferencing the selected background sound into a 3-way call between the caller and the

4   called party.